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November 27, 2013

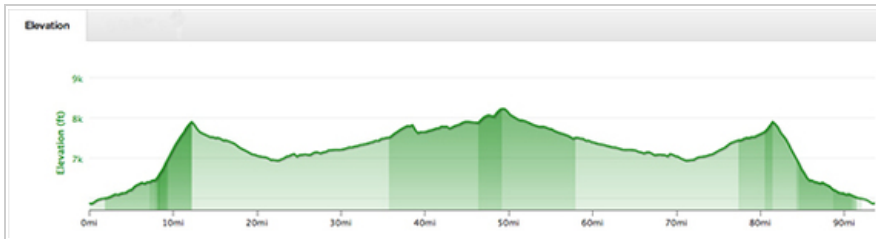
HUFF
POST TRAVEL

Idaho: Wine Tasting, SUP Yoga and 100-Mile Gravel Ride (PHOTOS)

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When Rebecca Rusch invited me to participate in her inaugural Rebecca's Private Idaho 100-mile gravel ride in Sun Valley, Idaho, I was excited but admittedly fearful. I knew any ride masterminded by Rebecca, the three-time 24-hour Solo Mountain Bike World Champion, dubbed "The Queen of Pain," would be brutal. Despite my white-knuckled ways, I signed up for what promised to be a gravel-grinding, lung-busting, dusty century ride, set for Labor Day weekend.



Searching for strength in a bottle or many bottles, I decided to spend a few pre-ride days in Boise, exploring Idaho's fledgling wine country. With more than 50 wineries - up from 13 in 1998 -- the area specializes in cool weather whites like Viognier and Riesling and sturdy reds, including spicy Syrah. Due to small production and restricted distribution, most Idaho wines never cross the state border,

keeping them hidden gems.

The majority of vineyards are clustered in the southwest Snake River Valley, while a handful of wineries have tasting rooms in downtown Boise, which is where I started my tour. Melanie Krause, the talented winemaker at Cinder Wines, a 7-year-old winery named for the sandy cinder soil, poured me her racy Dry Viognier. It was a medium-bodied sipper with rich stone fruit, terrific acidity and generous long spicy finish that would be perfect with Thai food.



At Coiled Wines, the Dry Riesling was similarly bright but with nutty aromas and ripe white peach nuances. The winemaker Leslie Preston, who donned a soft blue "Riesling Revolution" T-shirt, is on mission to educate imbibers about Riesling's beauty and diversity. She notes, "It's the quintessential food wine and not all Riesling is sweet!"

The next day, I checked out Idaho River Sports and spent the morning stand-up paddling past old Weeping Willow trees

along the gently flowing Boise River. Later, I joined instructor Nicole Vickerman and four yogis for an hour SUP yoga class on nearby Quinns pond. At home in NYC, I regularly practice yoga at Pure Yoga and SUP on the Hudson River, but this was a first. Under sunny skies peppered with puffy clouds, we dropped anchors to keep our boards in place. Balancing was trickier than I expected. I needed move slowly, while engage my belly to stay afloat and Downward Dog demanded my hands and feet press equally to keep the board stable. Standing on one leg for Tree Pose was the most challenging. Although, I used my paddle as a perch, I wiggled and wobbled, as if I had sipped too much wine.

To wrap up my Idaho wine exploration, I headed to Koenig Winery & Distillery in the Snake River Valley, where I met Greg Koenig in his Austrian-influenced winery and tasting room that he hand-built. A pioneer in Idaho winemaking, Koenig opened his winery in 1999 and consults with several local vineyards, like Williamson Orchards & Vineyards. Similar to Washington State, known for world-class Syrah, Idaho's grape growing region has warm sunny days and cool nights, producing grapes with dense fruit and excellent acid.



Koenig's award winning Dry Riesling was crisp with delightful tropical fruit and generous finish. While, the 2003 Cabernet Sauvignon had terrific structure, berry rich layers and lingering dark fruit finish that showcased Idaho wine's aging capability. I brought a bottle of Riesling and a Cabernet-Syrah blend with me to Sun Valley for a pre-ride dinner at my friend's Sun Valley home.

The Sunday morning of our 100-mile gravel ride was cool and breezy with clear cobalt skies. I stood in the bustling starting corral, among 200 fellow riders, chatting with two mountain bikers from Utah. They were straddling mountain bikes. I was happy to be using a Specialized Crux cyclocross bike, rather than riding my road bike with thin, slick tires. At precisely 8 a.m., Rebecca called out "3-2-1, go!" Our two-wheeled posse rolled through downtown Ketchum, along Sun Valley Road to Trail Creek Road, which led to the start of our first monster climb.

There were two divisions, the 100-mile Big Potato and 50-mile Small Fry that routed through Wild Horse Creek Canyon before returning to Ketchum. The 100-miler, also an out-and-back course, journeyed deep into the belly of Copper Basin, surrounded the rugged Pioneer Mountains.

The brawny headwind hammered. I tucked tight to my top tube and handlebars, trying to limit wind resistance on the first rolling section. As the road turned upward, the air thinned. Between huffs and puffs at nearly 8,000 feet, I chatted with a local guy who detailed the course's highlights and pitfalls. We admired the gorgeous views of the lush valley below. Up the road, the lead group of riders shattered on the steep pitched road. Our conversation halted as we hit tricky terrain on the last quarter of the climb, where the pavement dissolved into a scree-strewn mess during a steep out-of-the-saddle, leg-pumping switchback. It was the first of many times I was thankful for my 32-inch knobby tires.

At the first of four aid stations, stocked with energy drink, gels, PB & J and pretzels, I slurped a chocolate Powergel and readied myself for the rough stuff. Navigating the steep loose gravel downhill made me whine for my mommy. While, some rad mountain bikers zoomed through steep, stony sections, I embraced my brake-hugging, breath-holding ways. My hands and forearms throbbed from squeezing the sturdy brakes until we hit the bottom. Just as I started to breath

easy, grrrrrr, grrrrrr, grrrrr the knobby tires hissed along the bristling washing board dirt road. My brain felt like scrambled eggs



from my helmet chattering on the frames of my Smith PV2 sunglasses.

After the Small Fry riders turned back, it was no man's land. I was alone on an abandoned dusty road, cutting between low growing shrubs, in the underbelly of the Wild West. My only companions were emerald spruces scattered across the rocky hillsides. I slugged along, at times wondering if I was lost, until I spotted bike tire marks in the sandy loam.

My sweaty legs were caked in powdery dirt and sunglasses covered in a layer of filth. To add to the muck, four ATVs chugged by kicking up a dust storm that would make Charlie Brown's pal Pig Pen jealous. But it didn't matter, I was nearly back to the climb up the backside of Trail Creek Road -- and I knew there was a kicking party at the finish.

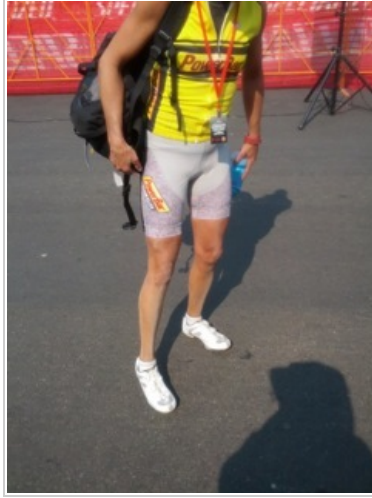


As I descended toward Ketchum, I was thrilled to hit pavement. Rattled and ravenous, I spun my dusty red two-wheel steed into town where I was welcomed by rocking country music and enticing food aromas. Looking like jockey on a muddy track, I pumped my weary arm upon crossing the finish line.

Food trucks abounded, serving Thai, BBQ, burgers, beer and wine. To celebrate a long, hard, fun ride with friends, we quaffed wine and cheered Rebecca Rusch, who is now known as the Queen of Pain and Party Planning!

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